A little house Le Corbusier

The site...

The region-the Lake Leman (Lake of Geneva) where the terraced vines rise one above the other.

This little house will shelter my father and mother in their old age, after a life of hard work. My mother is musician, my father a nature-lover.

I boarded the Paris-Milan express several times, or the Orient Express. In my pocket was the plan of a house.

The sun is to the south. The Lake spreads out to the south, backed by the hills. The Lake and the Alps mirrored in it are in front, lording it from east to west. Its length is a living-room four meters in depth, but sixteen meters long. The window is eleven meters long.

Dimensions precisely adapted to individual functions permit maximum exploitation of space. The arrangement is practical and spatially economical.

B2-2

A circuit

The road
The garden gate
the front door
the cloakroom
the kitchen
the wash-house
the exit to the courtyard
the living-room
the bedroom
bath
drying- and linen-room
small bed for guest

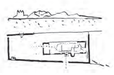
the front of the house and the window of eleven meters

the staircase to the roof.

We spent a long time looking for a site. After considering several, one day we discovered the right one.

It was on the lakeside and might be said to have been waiting specially for the little house.

The plan is tried out on the site and fits it like a glove. Four meters from the window is the lake and four meters behind the front door the road. The area offers an unparalleled view, of one of the finest horizons in the world.



B2-2

The little house

The little house was built in 1923

My father lived one year in this house. The scenery fascinated him. During his hard-working life high up in the mountains of Neuchatel he had opened our eyes to the wonders of nature. The countryside there was barren and rough.

On one side, blocking the horizon, was the last range of mountains, the last step of the staircase which elmbs the Jura from the French Rhone, on the other side the deep defile formed by the Doubs.

Building costs were extremely low. The contractor did not take architecture of this kind any too seriously. I was in Paris and had to rely on him! The walls were built of hollow blocks of cement concrete and sand.

B4-1

The northern side had one day to be revetted with shingles of galvanized iron plate' as are often used on farm-houses in the Jura to protect them against the weather. This useful armor looks very attractive.

To lend significance to the scenery one has to restrict it and give it proportion.

The solution was to enclose the small garden like a cloister garth and convert it into a green hall.

To please the dog (and this is 'important in a home) a small platform was built. And the dog enjoys himself!

The south wall was nevertheless pierced with a square aperture which opens up part of the view. Suddenly the wall comes to an end and the spectacle is revealed: light, space' the lake and the mountains.

Through the garden door, one reaches the garden loggia.

B1-5

We enter the house.

The window eleven meters in length gives it style! The part played by the window is an innovation' for it becomes the main feature' the chief attraction in the house. The proportions inside the house must be adapted to the height of the windowsill, the lintel and the division of the curtains ? very slender posts. Few hatches etc.... Expressive shape of the window. We shall soon see it again from outside.

The roller and mechanism of the shutters are outside. This prevents the cold air from penetrating through the traditional roller case. The window is thus the sole feature on this elevation.

But at the furthest extremity there is a genuine architectural element:

a board which serve.s as a seat and behind it three small horizontal grille windows which give light

B1-8

We climb up on to the roof-a pleasure known to some civilisations in former centuries.

The reinforced concrete forms the terrace roof and the "roof garden".

Here we are on top! We are in the middle of the dog-days; the grass is parched. What does it matter, for each tiny leaf gives shade and the compact roots insulate from heat and cold. They regulate the temperature without costing anything or requiring any upkeep.

Here is the overflow pipe for rainwater. It goes right through the house (as also the pipes for the wash-basins, the bath, the sink, etc.).

One of the skylights which illuminate the wash-room, the drying-room.

The roof garden lives independently, tended by the sun, the rain the winds and the birds which bring the seeds.

B2-2

Look! After almost thirty years the outer wall displays scars, warped parts of the tar. These are the wrinkles, inflammations and rheumatisms of the house.

Let us not forget that in 1923 this sile was as bare as a board; only a cherry-tree tied to its support produced three little twigs. Today there is plenty of shade and the sunshine is well distributed.

As soon as the building was finished, planting began-a fir, a poplar, a weeping willow, an acacia and a paulownia-all ung trees, mere whipper-snappers.

The cherry-tree has grown up into a fine specimen and provides my mother with enough cherries to make jam for the whole year.

B4-10

This last photograph to be taken from the lake shows the two survivors-the cherry-tree and the paulownia. Four meters away from the house front the old wall holds off the blue waters of the lake of geneva, witch are often consumed with devastating fury, the "Vaudeyre" as it is calles in these parts.

Houses too catch the whooping-cough.

It was to be expected that something would happen.

Don't forget that this was a very inexpensive house.

It was attacked by a strange affliction, for it cracked right across in one place. The impermeability of the roof prevented a catastrophe. But it was important to know what was the matter, so we made investigations.

B2-13

One day we were told that the houses on the shores of the Lake of Geneva get cracks at high water which close up again when the water level sinks. A strange way to breathe!

Archimedes stated that any body dropped into a liquid is subject to an upward thrust equal to the weight of the displaced liquid

With astonishment we noticed that the little cellar in the most westerly bay of the house-a water-tight cellar-becomes a floating boat when the water is high and thus receives the upward thrust of which the late lamented Archimedes was so fond. It should here be explained that the authorities lower the level of the lake once a year by opening the Rhone lock-gates and thus enable those living on the banks to carry out any necessary repairs.

B2-11

Every year the walls of the old houses on the lakeside get cracks which worry no one. The tiled roofs are hardly affected.

But a concrete house with cracks cuts a poor figure.

A butt-hinge of pliable copper-plate was constructed on the roof terrace. But in order to avoid the annual excitement of watching an experiment in physics the south elevation was covered with an aluminium facing.

B2-11

Drawings from the year 1945

Twenty-five years after this little house was built I indulged in the relaxation of making some drawings of it. They confirm the architectural features implied in the simple solution of 1923, a period when the search for a suitable form of house was not a question which exercised people's minds very much. The last drawing of September 1951 was done in celebration of my mother's ninety-first birthday.

B2-13

B2-14

B2-15

The crime

When the little house had been completed in 1924 and my father and mother were able to move in, the municipal council of a neighbouring commune met to decide that a building of this kind constituted "a crime against nature". Fearing lest it might nevertheless give rise to competition (who knows?) they forbade it ever to be imitated.

B2-16

The fir? It had to be felled, for its shadow didn't suit the poplar.

The poplar? It grew enormous. It was sawn right through the middle and then removed entirely, since its roots began to tickle the modest foundations of the little house. The acacia? It kept the sun off the lettuce-beds was removed.

The weeping willow? It wept too much and took the sunshine off the bedroom. It bathed its leaves in the lake and was every inch a poet! But nevertheless it had to go!

So there remains only the paulownia with its big, silly leaves. Its trunk is enormous and is covered with ivy like a spring meadow with dandelions. Undismayed it pushes out branches in all directions and defies the laws of statics.

Each year one of its branches is cut off, that is to say the one that has become intolerable.

B2-6

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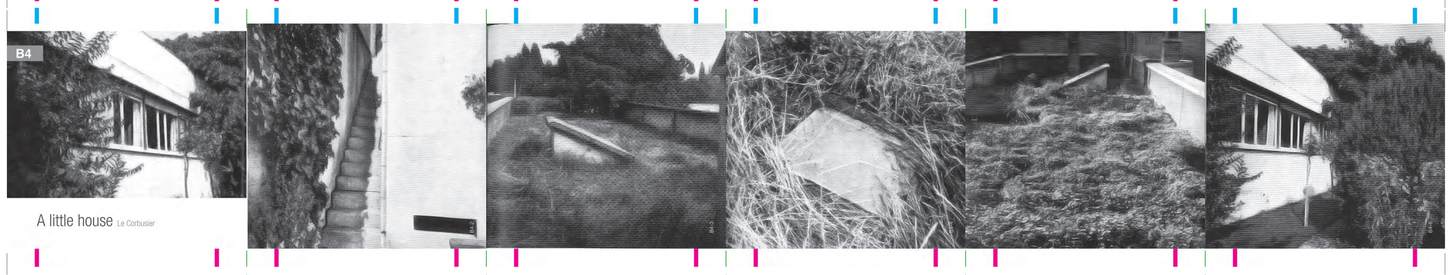

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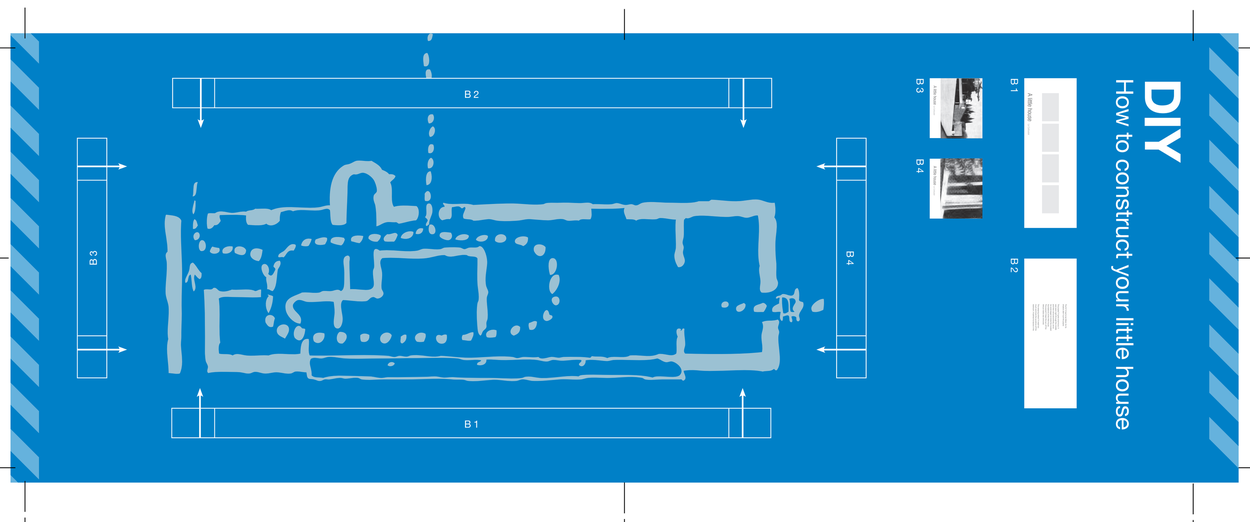
DIY
How to construct your little house



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